

Changing Caste Relations from An Ecological Perspective: A Socioecological Account of Agrarian Caste System

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Abstract— *This paper looks at the changing caste relations from an ecological perspective, focusing on Thathamangalam in Palakkad district, Kerala. Paddy cultivation in this region historically played a major role in shaping gender, caste, and community relations, as well as the human-nature relationship, as in other areas of Kerala. The institution of caste defined the agrarian and labour relationships in Thathamangalam, as in other agrarian societies. However, with a decline in paddy cultivation, agrarian structure has undergone significant transformation over the years. The agrarian structure, or its various dimensions since the time of independence, such as land reforms and the Green Revolution, brought about subsequent changes. Traditional agricultural labour relations have also changed with recent developments. This study tries to indicate how ecological factors interdigitate with social ones and aims to examine to what extent an ecological analysis is possible in dealing with the complex paddy relations of production in rice farming. Further, it also analyses the different social groups in conjunction with social relations around the use of natural resources in paddy cultivation.*



Keywords— *Caste relations, Paddy cultivation, Agrarian transformation, Labour relations, Thathamangalam*

Introduction

Paddy cultivation in Kerala provided an ecological framework for rural life. Agrarian social structure is primarily an institutional framework of agriculture, which includes the structural distribution of land holdings, the nature of land ownership, means and motives of production, and the members of the dominant class and the subordinate class of landless labourers. Due to the influence of changing ecological conditions i.e., the decline of paddy cultivation in the village, the social structure, polity and culture have undergone tremendous change.

Paddy cultivation in Chittur Thathamangalam area is in a declining phase. The low profitability of the crop, the increase in wages of agricultural labour, increased profit from other crops, and water scarcity are certain factors that have led to decreased paddy production. Primary data was

collected through an extensive sample survey of households. It was conducted in various stages. Personal narratives and interviews were collected across various castes to understand their long-standing social issues. Unstructured interviews were conducted with officials such as village extension officers and several other members of organizations working in the village.

Twenty households have been selected from the Chittur-Thathamangalam area. The region has several *Menon* Tharavads and many *agraharams* etc. The agrarian social structure of Thathamangalam is the same as that of other regions of Malabar. The lower castes performed agricultural work. Most of the paddy fields exist near temples or *agraharams*. The *Tiyya* caste performed major work in the fields, and some of them are owners as well. Labourers were drawn from attached labour communities

such as *Pulayan, Cheruman, Zhuran, Sambavan, Kanakkan* and *Vettavan* castes.

There are almost 46 SC colonies in Chittur Thathamangalam municipality, and many of their residents, shared their experiences. Years back, people in these colonies were fully involved in paddy cultivation, but now

only 30 percent of them are involved in paddy related work. None of them, except for one or two families, own agricultural land. Most of them remain landless agricultural labourers. Many of the informants explained stories of exploitation, servitude, and a deep sense of injustice perpetrated against them in the past.

Table 4.1: SC Colonies in Chittur-Thathamangalam Municipality

Sl. No	Colonies	Caste	Ward no	Families	Female	Male
1.	Cherumkod	Kanakkan	1	10	22	27
2.	Thuppalakulam	Kanakkan	2	18	39	37
3.	Vellappana	Kanakkan	1	3	5	4
4.	Ilayabhagavathikkavu	Kanakkan	3	20	39	42
5.	Arangampalod	Kanakkan	3	18	35	30
6.	Parakkulam	Kanakkan	4	29	40	35
7.	Thekkinkadu	Kavara	4	25	51	57
8.	Chembakasery	Kavara	4	22	39	34
9.	Palekkad	Kavara	4	15	30	25
10.	Thudukkodu	Kavara	2	8	21	13
11.	Chingattukulambu	Kavara	2	42	89	81
12.	Pakkod	Kavara	4	25	40	37
13.	Nellikodu	Kavara	27	17	33	30
14.	Idayankulambu	Parayan	20	17	26	31
15.	Poongodu	Kanakkar	29	16	39	39
16.	Mankavu	Kanakkar	2	7	18	12
17.	Kurinchira	Kanakkar	27	5	15	10
18.	Meenikkodu	Parayar	22	10	10	22
19.	Banglaparambu	Kanakkar	22	15	35	25
20.	Kadavankodu	Kanakkar	22	8	18	14
21.	Paruthikkavu	Parayar	23	40	75	85
22.	Thaniyampadam	Parayar	23	35	65	75
23.	Thumbichira	Kanakkar	24	30	52	68
24.	Neelikkadu	Kanakkar	24	25	55	45
25.	Umikkunnu	Kanakkar	24	35	85	65
26.	Nellukuthupara	Panan, cherman both	9	45	62	43
27.	Naramkuzhi	Panan, Cherunan both	9	38	68	52
28.	Vadakkathara	Chakliar	8	32	74	64
29.	Parayankodu	Cheruman	5	42	73	56
30.	Cheriyaparayankodu	Cheruman	5	34	63	48
31.	Nayadicolony	Nayadi	5	12	45	30
32.	Muthukadu	Panan	6	35	74	62

33.	Erumankodu	Nayadi	5	25	55	45
34.	Kacherimedu	Domban	13	36	82	64
35.	Aryamballam	Kavara	14	38	102	75
36.	Thamarachira	Kavara	14	28	51	42
37.	Channathodu	Mannan, cheruman both	14	20	58	45
38.	Pulinkovil	Cheruman	14	26	53	42
39.	Manthakadu	Panan	14	32	63	58
40.	Valmutti	Panar	16	40	84	78
41.	Valmutti	Panar	16	35	72	65
42.	Anikkodu Thekkegramam	Kanakkancher	17	31	68	61
43.	Kadalar	Kanakkar	16	25	55	43
44.	Moosaliparambu	Kanakkakar	16	37	68	54
45.	Tharakkalam	Kavara	19	30	67	53
46.	Ladies hostel road	Panan, cherumar	21	38	74	68

Source: Data from field study as well as from scheduled caste development office, Nattukal

The major portions of land were under the control of Namboothiris or Nayar families. However, the breakup of joint families partitioned the land into small parts, and they could not maintain these small portions under changing circumstances. The caste system provided adequate labour for the agriculture fields. The disintegration of the caste system reduced the number of agricultural labourers. The availability of other work created alternate employment opportunities for the village people. The development of education also enabled upward mobility from their lower strata. Ezhava people also obtained land after land reforms. However, lower-caste people like *Cherumar*, *Pulayar* etc. did not get any land for their survival. They had to be satisfied with low-paid jobs.

Most of the land owners changed the fields for residential purposes. The real estate mafia also had a hand in this process. Traditionally, they used bullocks for ploughing. Now, almost all farmers use tractors or tillers for this work. The manual labour used for trimming and repairing bunds before the first crop is costly due to higher labour expenses. Paddy cultivation has become a burden for farmers in Kerala. Local paddy farmers cannot sell their produce at a competitive price. The local way of life is disappearing as farmers and communities who nurtured age-old cultivation have now withdrawn from agriculture. Thus, landowners are using their right to opt for the crop of their choice and convert paddy fields to other crops and non-agricultural purposes. As for landowners, most of them are not full-time farmers, and hence the maximization of returns and the freedom of individual choice to shift away from

paddy to other non-paddy crops are inevitable to ensure adequate returns.

As these people, who were mostly engaged in paddy-related work, have moved to new occupational space, the link between caste or community and hereditary occupation has been severed. At the same time, there has been a substantial rise in non-agricultural occupations in the countryside, mainly due to better linkages with cities/towns and changes in lifestyle.

Vanishing Caste Labour Relations in Thathamangalam

Agrarian relations in this village some years ago were totally different. They have already changed quite radically. The agrarian social structure gradually lost its importance, and access to education enabled the working class to take up different occupations such as teacher, peon, clerical staff, etc.

An improvement in the general standard of living among the lower class is a notable aspect of this region. Several *Pulayas* have good houses, with plastered walls and tiled roofs. Many youths are matriculates, and several have received a university education. *Pulayas* are found to be very anxious to provide the maximum possible education to their children, and they take great pains to ensure that their children are educated. People of higher castes now freely mix with the lower classes. Dalits have almost completely withdrawn from paddy-related work. Many of them have moved to foreign countries in search of jobs. There are instances where the lower-caste people, with the money brought from abroad, demanded land from the upper classes

and bought it. The decline of agrarian caste relations has different implications for different sections of the population, and there can be different ways of looking at these changes.

For those on the margins, particularly the ex-untouchable Dalits, this change has only been for the better. It has freed them from the oppressive normative order of caste and the traditional value framework of hierarchy. They wanted their children to get educated and move out of the village. For the dominant and upper castes, this has meant an end to their power and privilege. They were critical of these changes. Upper-caste people do not insist their children be involved in paddy farming; instead, they want their children to get educated and move out of the village.

With the emergence of this new environment, members of the backward groups or castes—who were bonded to masters in the past—no longer accepted their status as an inexorable fate. They have become assertive. It is thus a widespread feature of the Indian countryside that labourers have become more demanding, aggressive, and less docile and respectful of the traditional social hierarchy. At another level, these changes have also generated a new sense of individuation in village society. Also, in the absence of viable economic opportunities and social support structures, they have generated a new sense of anxiety, a kind of “ontological insecurity” (Giddens, 1991).

Change in Power Relations

There has been a sharp decline in the supremacy of the higher castes, such as Nayar and Namboothiris, in the study area. In the past, the higher castes occupied the topmost position in the caste hierarchy. But today, they do not enjoy the same status that they once did. The relationship between caste and hereditary occupations has been less significant, and there has been a significant shift in the bases of power. Deshpande (2017) argues that the caste-based occupational structure has undergone a profound change and that the link between caste and occupation has been broken. Social status, as well as economic and political power, shifted towards a more open, class-structured society where status is based on attributes such as education, wealth and political influence. Certain factors, such as occupational diversification, migration to urban areas, and the role of media and the state, have helped to break the boundaries between caste groups. The expansion of education created a greater shift from a caste-based ascribed status system to an achieved one, and an individual’s distinctive qualities and attainments became linked to social status. Diversified livelihood options, along with transportation, communication, and educational

facilities, have been influential in bringing about change in the village.

One respondent from the field observed that when people in the village engage in conversation with each other, people from the upper castes used to say to lower-caste people that “your fathers were our slaves.” This reveals that the upper castes try to recollect the old days of power and domination. Talking about past tradition by the upper castes is a way of eulogizing and boasting about their past.

An End to Domination and Exploitation?

It could be argued that exploitation and domination are diminishing in the village, leading to fewer inequalities. Status was determined by the caste to which one was born. Moreover, customs and rituals conferred prestige and status on certain groups and occupations in the village.

One class appropriates the fruits of the labour of another class by virtue of possessing superior control over the means of production. The welfare of the exploiting class depends upon the work of the working class. We believe that untouchability is an institutional mechanism whereby the attribute of toxicity is imparted to certain groups of caste, which as a result become untouchable. Obviously, since jatis are not biological species, the members of untouchable castes do not acquire toxic properties, but these properties become attributed to them through a process of historical discrimination and subordination. Untouchability, on the principle of antibiosis, separated people from one another. The notions of purity and pollution legitimized this separation.

Avoidance relations are the norm that the rest of society imposes on these populations. It is deeply provocative but nonetheless logical to hold that the evolution of untouchability was, in an ecological sense, an effective strategy for imposing discrimination. Centuries of caste-based social organization prevailed in Thathamangalam, as in other areas of Kerala.

Analyzing caste from the Subaltern point of view, caste has functioned as a very effective system of exploitation and suppression. The ideal type of non-competition, non-antagonism, the ideology of *dharma* and *karma* accepted by all, etc., which are in the interest of elite groups, are no longer a reality now.

The new technology, new middle classes, and the metropolitan-globalized cultural styles of life that are emerging are detached from the traditional religious and ritual moorings of their culture. The present globalized world has brought forth people detached from the clutches of traditional religious life and the caste system.

Changing Habitus based on Caste Hierarchy

Bourdieu (1985) used the term *symbolic capital* to distinguish and identify social groups that enjoy greater prestige and honour in society because they are endowed with more symbolic capital, reflected in their patterns of behaviour and taste. The notion of the 'social' also has a similar connotation. It demonstrates that certain social groups have greater capacity to form social relations and competence to associate with others. These notions indicate that differences in terms of esteem, prestige, and status, rather than economic or political hierarchy, may play a dominant role in some systems of stratification. In these terms, capital is represented in four basic forms. Each form can be exchanged or 'cashed in' for any other form. These changing situations created a change in habitus and the power associated with it.

Bourdieu's theorization enables us to connect the past with present conditions in an agrarian society like that of Chittur-Thathamangalam. The concept of habitus explains how objective structure and subjective perceptions impact upon human action. In an agrarian society, caste, as a stable hierarchical system of stratification, served as the habitus that controlled its members and members were assigned to perform particular work.

The members of lower castes, who were mostly agrarian labourers, suffered from several restrictions and were prone to oppression. Educational opportunities, scientific and technological progress, urbanization, communication facilities, industrialization, changes in the economic structure, independent thinking, mobility, and access to the outside world transformed the agrarian society of Thathamangalam, which helped them obtain social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Now as a result of new legislative measures, their condition has improved. They are provided with several facilities that are not available to members of other castes. Certain reservations have also been made for them. Because of these changes, they have improved their position, both economically and socially.

The importance of landlords has diminished with the emergence of big capitalists and industrialists. Because of this change in the economic structure, wealth has acquired importance and a wealthier person is respected the most. People move to professions that are more remunerative. Professions no longer correspond to caste. The next generation of agricultural labourers goes to other places and seeks better employment.

Changing Identities

The loss of paddy culture may be one of the reasons behind the 'identity change' of different caste groups in the study area. According to Woodward (1997), identity gives us an idea of who we are and how we relate

to others and to the world in which we live. Identity is often defined by difference; in other words, it is defined by what it is not. Woodward suggests that identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and again, it also marks the ways in which we are different from those who do not. Identities are, thus, often constructed in terms of binary oppositions such as self/other, us/them, insider/ outsider, in here/out there, black/white, man/woman, civilized/barbarian etc. Identities are defined, constructed, consumed, and regulated within a particular culture or society, and meanings are created through "symbolic systems of representation about the identity positions (Woodward,1997)" within that culture or society.

As in other agrarian societies, the lower-caste agrarian labourers of Chittur-Thathamangalam were allowed access only to unskilled forms of labour. Their reflective abilities, as well as innovative and imaginative capacities, were given no importance. They did not have access to education and were forced to work in subordination. There was no possibility of vertical mobility. Under the changed conditions, they have opportunities for education, which enabled them to attain professional skills, and many of them achieved vertical mobility.

Displaced Agrarian Mode of Production

Agriculture became more capital-intensive in nature. In Thathamangalam, as in other agrarian societies, the expansion of industrial economy has partially displaced the older modes of production; rather, it is right to say that different modes of production exist side by side and may create a hybrid economy, and a cultural lag is noted. Agriculture, which was once considered a prestigious occupation has lost its relevance. The feudal relationship between cultivator and labourer has been broken. Opportunities for education helped the lower castes widen their worldview, and they searched for new areas of profitability and moved to other non-farming sectors.

The landowners lost the higher status and respect they had maintained for years. The dominant castes no longer enjoy the hegemony of power.

Rural Proletarianization

Thirty-eight-year-old Sudhakaran, who is an agricultural labourer in Thathamangalam, is landless. He survives on wage labour in paddy fields. He said, "*I was poor before and am poor now. We do not have land. My parents were starving in the past, and the situation has not changed much for me. I cannot even meet the needs of my family members.*"

This striking disparity and dispossession are consequences of centuries of oppressive practices, where

Dalit cultivators worked as slaves on the lands of rich landlords and later for wages. This may be viewed as a continuation of that system. In spite of land reforms, the subservient status of Dalits is still continuing in certain cases.

The 'rural proletariat' is a sociological category that refers to landless workers in peasant communities. The actual tillers of the soil are wage labourers. The proletariat is the class of wage earners in a society whose only possession of significant material value is their labour power (how much work they can do). A member of such a class is proletarian. We see the persistence and reproduction of peasant units of production, which continues to be the main source of subsistence for a large part of the village population. The majority of the labourers of Chittur Thathamangalam are part of this category. Labourers are connected to the landowners as they work for them. The marginalization and proletarianization of the peasantry are other outcomes of commercialization of agriculture. Agricultural wage labourers are still landless. Thus, inequality in ownership of land still continues. Proletarianization, an important indicator of the development of a capitalist economy, is reflected in the extent of landlessness. According to NSSO data (Government of India, National Sample Survey Organisation [NSSO], 2006), the extent of landlessness in Indian agriculture has stayed more or less constant over the last five decades: at 11.7% in 1961 which marginally declined to 10 % in 2003.

A new scheme is being implemented in the study area for the most vulnerable groups, such as *Chakliar*, *Nayadi*, *Vedan*, *Kalladiar*, etc., to promote paddy cultivation in the study area. A proposal to provide 10 lakh rupees for the purchase of 25 cents of paddy field is a new initiative by the Kerala government to retain paddy cultivation in selected areas and promote paddy cultivation.

Disappearing Rigid Division of Labour

With a steady decline in paddy-related work and with the introduction of modern technology and education, many people in Chittur –Thathamangalam have moved out intergenerationally and shifted to other jobs.

Caste, which has persisted as a religious and feudal ideology, is disappearing. According to Ambedkar, the caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is a hierarchy in which one labourer is graded above the other (Kuber, 1991). This division of labour was not spontaneous; it was neither based on natural aptitudes nor on choice. An individual's sentiment had no place in it. Caste cannot be viewed as a feature of civilized society with a Durkheimian version of organic solidarity inherent in it. Division of labour is a feature of any civilized society, but caste system

cannot be viewed as a progressive feature because it creates rigid norms, curtails freedom of individual members in the society and compartmentalize people into different groups in society. Any feature that promotes an unnatural division of labour and restricts individual freedom cannot be considered progressive. The caste system suppresses the natural powers, inclinations and skills of individuals. Caste prevents labourers from becoming a class in itself; hence, caste has persisted as religious and Indian feudal ideology.

However, today the caste system is not as strong. The caste system in India provided a division of labour. It is a hierarchical system in which the people were graded. This division of labour was not spontaneous; it was not based on the skills or efficiency of a person, who was unable to choose his own career according to his abilities. This stratification of occupations was based on the caste system. This situation has now changed. Agrarian changes and rapid industrialization changed the situation. Previously, the rigid caste system did not permit any readjustment of occupations. Change is a characteristic of all societies, whether primitive or modern. A society undergoing revolutionary changes may lose its earlier identity because of the replacement of a large number of institutions.

The formal abolition of slavery did effect some changes in the life of the *Pulayas*. The enactments against slavery were the first reforms made in Kerala for the downtrodden. Members of the lower castes were profoundly ignorant and superstitious, steeped in abject poverty, and subjected to many vexations, restrictions, and disabilities. Their emancipation from slavery brought improvements in their material conditions. Caste was possibly one of the most abhorrent mechanisms devised by human beings to oppress other human beings.

Critical Analysis on Ecological-Niche Sustainable Relationships of Castes

'The role of God is played by Nature. Nature (Qudratka Mela) created human beings from the original source (adi) at the time it created all beings on the earth ... Everyone believed in one dharma which Nature had given them through intellect and knowledge' (Juergensmeyer, 2009).

Based on field data from western Maharashtra, Gadgil and Malhotra (1983), in their essay described the ecological reasons that maintained the stability of the caste system. They explained how, by living in the same geographic region, different *jatis* organized and used resources with minimal competition. Devices of resource partition and territorial exclusion ensured that individual *jatis*, and often individual families, had a monopoly over a specific resource in a particular territory. They argue that these practices promoted the sustainable use

of natural resources (what they term 'prudence') thereby facilitating the long-term persistence of caste. With its reproductive isolation and hereditary mode of subsistence, a caste population can be considered an analogue of a biological species and assigned an ecological niche.

The ecologist Madhav Gadgil and the anthropologist K. C. Malhotra have described the caste system as a set of trophic levels in which different castes occupy ecological niches marked by division of labour and resource partitioning. They argued that the caste system has endured over centuries and that its ecological stability was retained by limiting inter-caste competition over natural resources (*Indian Journal of Social Work*, n.d.).

Fieldwork by Gadgil and Malhotra revealed that different endogamous groups living in the same region minimized competition through resource partitioning and exclusion. Thus, individual castes, and often individual families or lineages within them, were by customarily assigned a monopoly over a particular resource in a particular territory. This reduced competition, fostered prudence, and helped maintain the stability of the system in the long run.

While examining nature through the lens of caste, we could say that the Gadgil-Malhotra report is an attempt that ignores the "environmentalism of the poor." The critique made in this context is that these ideas seem to emerge from a dominant discursive framework. Subordinate groups had very limited access to and control over land, which in turn led to food insecurity. They also lacked access to water and other communal resources.

The endurance of the Indian caste system has other explanations too. One group of scholars argues that its basis lies in a close connection between caste and class (with upper castes controlling land and other productive assets), while another group of scholars argues that caste has endured because its ideology is widely accepted by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Unambiguously, for Ambedkar (Sharma, 2017), human encompass nature, and nature is governed by social relationships. Nature has been socialized and converted into human's social body; it has led to far-reaching transformations. Such an understanding essentially alters the 'natural' course of various processes, including that of the biosphere, or the biological, animate part of nature. Ambedkar was very critical of ideologies of universal and social nature, as they often concealed the past and politics of exploitative casteist relations.

While comparing this situation in the context of Kerala in general and Chittur Thathamangalam municipality in particular, it can be seen that the problem of utilization of natural resources in a caste society shows

issues of dominance and subordination. This is the reason for depriving the lowest strata of caste society of access to the essentials of life. Also, in the Kerala context, common property resources are scarce and access to these common resources is restricted. There are instances where lower castes were denied the raw materials for making essentials such as houses.

If we examine historically, it becomes clear that Dalits were never permitted to use wood and bricks to construct houses. They were never allowed any roofing material except thatch. Therefore, they were forcibly kept away from using durable materials for construction. It was the same logic of dominant control over natural resources by the upper castes that deprived untouchable castes of access to even resources for subsistence. This was not a sustainable mode of using natural resources, as it deprived the oppressed castes of access to basic resources.

Thus, the ecological balance described above may have been maintained only by depriving large sections of society of access to common property resources.

The Idea of Social Ecology as opposed to Hierarchy and Domination

Challenging the ideas of Madhav Gadgil and Malhotra, the idea of social ecology is opposed to all forms of hierarchy and domination, as well as to class exploitation. Even as we struggle to save the biosphere, it argues we must strive to eliminate domination, be it in matters of race, gender, sexual identity, and class exploitation. But today, the most immediate cause of the ecological crisis is the set of social relations known as capitalism. The nation-state is essential to the system, constituting the apparatus by which capitalist societies maintain social control through a monopoly of the use of force and, at the same time, nullify social unease to a tolerable level by providing certain minimal social services.

Social ecology, from an ecological-humanitarian perspective, sees human beings as the most differentiated and complex life forms on the planet, without which neither consequences nor freedom would exist.

CONCLUSION

Agrarian changes have created drastic changes in any society. It has freed them from the oppressive normative order of caste and the traditional valued frame of hierarchy. For the dominant and the upper castes, this has meant an end of their power and privilege. In such a transitional phase, indifference becomes particularly dangerous, for "indifferentism is the worst kind of disease that can affect people (Ahir, 2007)."

It has become a truism today that caste in India and the entire economic organization of the village has changed. Also, the meaning of the village for its residents has also undergone a complete change.

Ecological compulsions can restructure a social system in a new pattern; it can also change the mindset, including people's aspirations, leisure, and enjoyment etc. New ecological compulsions are being brought about by the modern world. It may shape our minds for the future. From an ecological point of view, therefore, it is impossible to defend the continuation of castes or in any way uphold their positive contributions to social life and at the same time hope to sincerely remove the belief in untouchability. But it can be made a point of studying how the solidarities inherent in a particular system or institutions can perform important functions in the contemporary transitional society or how the traditional institutions can be remodelled in contemporary society.

As has been observed, "the transformation of nature by powerful economic and technological forces was not only having a living impact on separate components of landscapes but was closely associated with the possibility of changing society altogether, and with it, its inseparable biosocial organ, i.e., human and humanity" (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, n.d.).

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